Qatari Culture

A Brief Guide

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Introduction

This guide is intended as a brief overview of some of the cultural norms in Qatar, and a simple introduction to those who have decided to live, work or visit here. It is brief, and provides concise information that is of the utmost importance to those of you who are embarking upon this new experience.

We have written this so that your time in Qatar is relaxed and informed, and that apprehensions about business and cultural conduct are understood. It is a stepping-stone to allow you to wander around the beautiful, rich, encompassing country that many expatriates have decided to call home.

Qatar is a safe place to explore, one of the most tranquil in the world, and we hope that you take this opportunity to grow your personality, enrich yourself spiritually, and take away a part of Qatar entwined in your heart.

An introduction to Qatari Life

From the depth of the desert sands a great state has emerged, transformed into a modern metropolis whilst actively remembering its heritage – the endearing State of Qatar.

Qatar - the beginning

The name "Qatar" is a latinized transliteration from the Arabic قطر pronounced locally as gitar. Human habitation of the peninsula dates as far back as 50,000 years, when small groups of Stone Age inhabitants built coastal encampments and settlements.

Islam spread through the entire Arabian region during the 7th century and all the inhabitants of Qatar became Muslim, heralding the beginning of the Islamic era in Qatar.

A harsh climate and lack of resources made it difficult for settlements to develop and prosper for any significant length of time before the discovery of oil. The peninsula was used as rangeland for nomadic tribes, and fishing and pearling settlements were established on those parts of the coast near a major well. On the 18th of December 1878 Sheikh Jassim bin Mohammad Al-Thani founded Qatar, unifying the Qatari tribes under his rule.

The 1930s was a period of hardship for the Qatari people; the introduction of the Japanese cultured pearl caused Qatar's pearling industry to crash. Furthermore, the disruption of food supplies caused by World War II brought about a near-famine.

The discovery of oil, beginning in the 1940s, completely transformed the state's economy, marking a turning point in Qatar. The country gained its independence in 1971 and consequently it was recognised by the UN.

In more recent times, Qatar has moved away from being an oil-dependent economy and has strived to diversify its economy through multibillion-dollar investments both domestically and abroad.

Geography of Qatar

Qatar is a peninsula, surrounded by water from all sides except the south, where it is connected to Saudi Arabia. It spans around 200 km north to south and 100 km east to west.

The main cities of Qatar are:

DOHA: The capital city

AL-WAKRA: The old fishing port for Doha residents and now a suburb of Doha.

MESSAIEED: An industrial city 50 km south of Doha housing a number ofindustrial plants.

AL-KHOR: A main city 50 km north of Doha. It used to be one of the best ports for fishing and pearl diving.

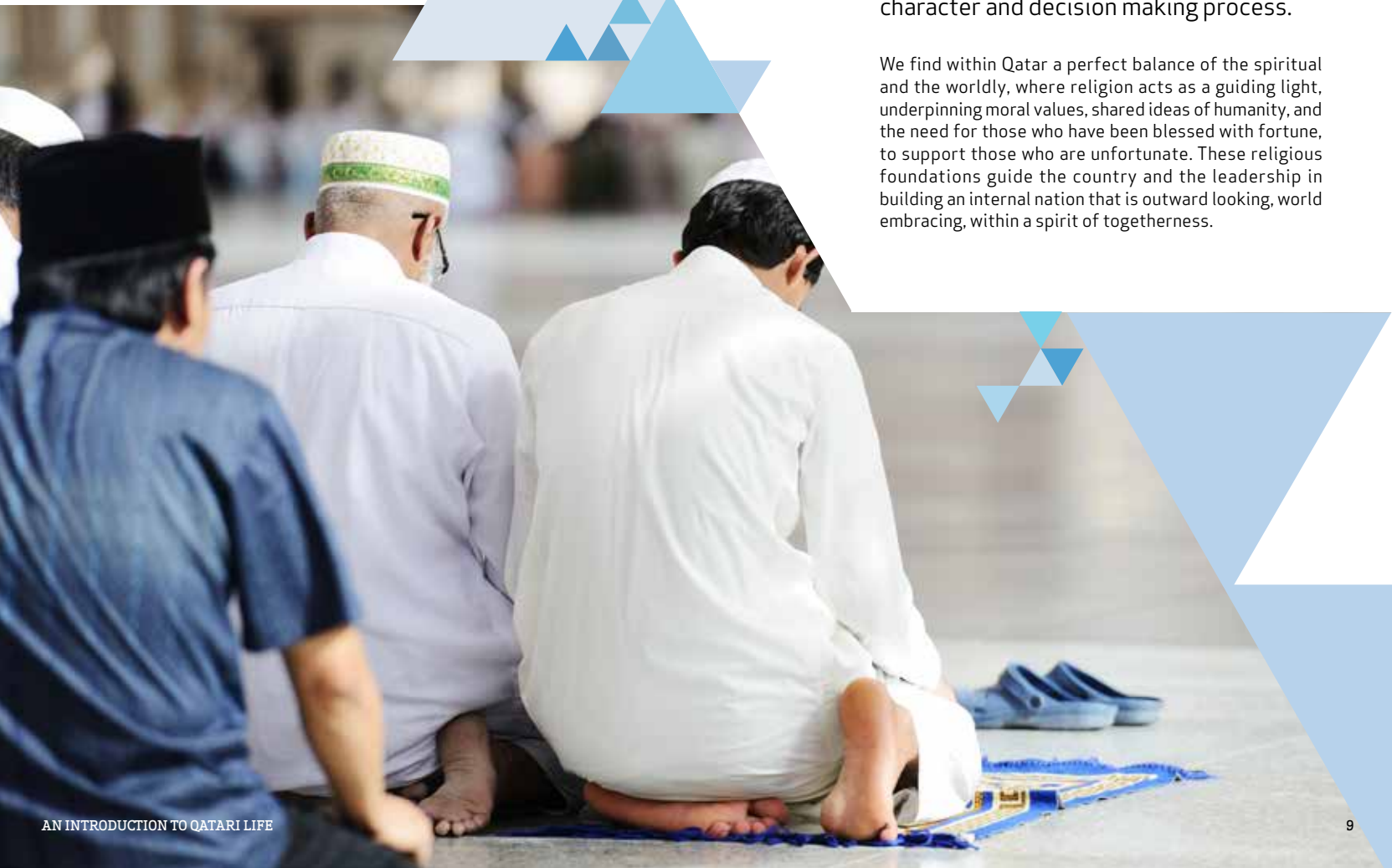
RAS LAFFAN: Also towards the north, it is the center for the natural gas industry.

DUKHAN: On the west coast of Qatar, the center of the onshore oil industry.

As of November 2021, the population of Qatar has grown to over 2.6 million people, with the local indigenous Qatari population totaling approximately 320,000 (12%).

Qatar is a melting pot of civilizations, a model for the rest of the world where communities live side-by-side in peace and harmony.

Religion in Qatar



Qatar is a conservative Muslim country, the manifestation of which can be seen by the leadership who maintain religious guidance as a central part of their character and decision making process.

We find within Qatar a perfect balance of the spiritual and the worldly, where religion acts as a guiding light, underpinning moral values, shared ideas of humanity, and the need for those who have been blessed with fortune, to support those who are unfortunate. These religious foundations guide the country and the leadership in building an internal nation that is outward looking, world embracing, within a spirit of togetherness.

Islam, which means submission to the will of God, is founded on the central belief of a supreme creator of the universe as we know it, and that which has still to be discovered.

Some may define this creator, this designer of life as 'God' – Who Muslims believe to be the only one worthy of worship, that which is one, alone, supreme, has no children, existed before life as we know it, and will continue to exist eternally.

The proper noun '*Allah*' – a word used by many civilizations is used to explain the true unique nature of God. The largest sin in Islam is to associate partners or intermediaries to Allah, so there are no idols, humans or shapes that we worship – the Islamic relationship with the creator is an individual one, and a direct one.

Islam teaches that Allah sent a chain of prophets to mankind, from the very first of people Adam, to the final prophet Muhammad, peace be upon them all. These prophets included many virtuous people who had the same essential duty; remind people to worship Allah alone, do not associate partners with Allah, and live a moral life.

Other prophets include Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus – all an integral part of our belief system.

Muslims believe in the books that were sent to these prophets in their original form. The only one remaining in its entirety, unchanged, and in the original language as revealed is the Qur'an – direct word of God to mankind as guide for life.

These essential principles are universally accepted by the 1.9 billion Muslims on the globe today, and form the underpinnings and the rationale to our behaviour.

Muslims follow the instructions in the Qur'an and the teachings of the final prophet, Muhammad, may peace be upon him and all of the prophets.

Education in Qatar

In the past, when children were around 6 years old they went to the Mutawwa', who would teach them the Qur'an as well as the basics of reading, writing and mathematics.

In 1952, the state education system was established, providing free education to all Qataris in government funded schools.

Qatar University - the first national university in Qatar - accepted its first batch of students in 1973, and currently has an alumni body of over 40,000.

In 1995, Qatar Foundation was established with a mission to serve the people of Qatar by supporting education, science and research, and community development. It has established a number of branches of some of the world's most renowned universities.

With its aspirations for modernization, Qatar has placed an emphasis on education and the economy to ensure prosperity for its citizens.

Qatar is becoming a focal point for the world's leading scientists and researchers and is one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

This rapid change occurred at the same time as initiatives were launched that aimed to preserve Qatar's rich cultural heritage, a heritage whose roots are deeply set in Islamic beliefs.

And there's more ahead. Qatar's National Vision aims to transform the state into an advanced country by 2030, capable of sustaining its own development and providing for a high standard of living for its entire population for generations to come.

Qatari Culture

People of Qatar

Qatari society is a tribal society and even now in the 21st century the tribe is important to individuals; the link between an individual and his or her tribe is immensely strong. Tribe members are loyal and are unified in both adversity and prosperity.

In general, Qatari people belong to one of two groups: desert people and coastal people. The desert people or the '*bedu*' are the people that were historically the camel and goat herders. They lived in tents and moved between locations looking for sustenance for themselves and their animals. All Bedouin tribes have now settled into the cities and towns of Qatar.

The coastal people, or the '*hathar*', are the people that lived in coastal settlements and made their living as fishermen or working in the pearl industry.

Nowadays the distinction between the two groups is becoming less and less significant with both desert and coastal people living amongst one another and now leading very similar lifestyles.

Qataris are still strongly connected to the desert. In the cool winter, Qataris head to the desert for camping, hunting and to seek *'faga'*, desert truffles. '*Faga*' grow naturally just below the surface of the ground if enough rain falls during a period between October and December. '*Faga*' is a delicacy enjoyed by both young and old, and the search for these truffles in itself is an enjoyable Qatari pastime.

The Qatari Family

As Qatar is a tribal society, the meaning of 'family' could be extended to include the whole tribe!

Qataris usually marry young; on average males marry between 23 and 30, and females between 18 and 25. Marriages are mostly arranged albeit with the consent of both the bride and the groom. Most couples start off by living within the family house, and many small families will continue to live with their husband's family until they own their own home.

Women do not change their names when married. It is very common to name the firstborn male and female after their paternal grandparents as it is considered a form of respect and a way to remember them even after they have passed away.

It is also very common in Qatari culture to use the "nickname" Abu or Umm, e.g. Abu Ahmed (meaning father of Ahmed) and Umm Ahmed (meaning mother of Ahmed). The full name of a Qatari represents his or her lineage, showing their father's, grandfather's and tribal name.

Qatari Values

The people of Qatar embody values that are entwined with moral codes found within Islam, and these ethics and ideals are passed from generation to generation with the aim of promoting an altruistic society that also embraces modernity.

Some of these include respecting elders and women, showing mercy to the young, keeping relations with kinfolk, providing relief to those who are in need, being lenient with speech, cheerfulness, unselfishness, and establishing good manners.

One of the most important practices of the Qatari people revolves around honoring parents, and this manifests by obeying them in goodness, serving them, respecting them with kind words, and doing good deeds on their behalf.

Furthermore, the Qatari people keep good relationships with relatives and doing favor to all kith and kin, regardless of how far the familial connection is. You will find that within the regular majlis meetings, generations of a family will sit together.

Altruism is a genuine and deep-rooted disposition amongst Qataris, where there is a genuine concern for the welfare of others. This is reflected at every level of Qatari society, with the state, institutions, and individuals all ready to support those in genuine need.

Respecting others, being soft in speech, staying away from vulgar speech, being cheerful, caring, and honoring the guest are all traits that are common to the people of Qatar.

Al-Majlis

Al-Majlis is a central feature of every Qatari house and as such it plays a crucial part of the culture of Qatar.

It is a room located by the home and prepared specially to receive guests. When visiting, there are certain protocols that should be adhered to.

One should say *"As-Salaamu-Alaikum"* as you enter the majlis, starting with the elders and the owner of the majlis, and then greeting the rest of the people. This phrase means "Peace be upon you" and signifies that you come in peace and friendship.

The guests in the majlis are offered dates and are served Qatari coffee in small servings. Coffee is drunk using the right hand, and it is customary to drink an odd number of servings. Having finished drinking, one should gently shake the empty cup and return it to the server. This indicates that you are satisfied, otherwise the cup will be refilled and returned to you.

When food is served to the guests, they should wash their hands first, and then take food and eat with their right hand. The guest should eat a little, even if fully satiated, as a sign of respect to the host. As the meal ends, the guests often offer a small supplication to bless the host as they leave to wash their hands. Tea and coffee are often served again.

Whilst guests are in the majlis, trying to join in the conversation is beneficial, so as to make the most of the experience. If you don't speak Arabic, someone in the family who knows the most English will make some effort to engage with you, whilst those in the house who don't speak English may be shy to converse, as you would find in many parts of the world. Everyone is careful to avoid raising their voice or interfering in the privacy of others.

Finally, *oud* (a strong woody perfume) or incense, is offered to guests as the evening draws to a close.

Qatari Clothing

The traditional Qatari attire is modest and concealing in accordance with Islamic teachings.

The men wear a long, loose white garment called a '*thobe*', and headgear consisting of a white scarf folded into a triangle called '*ghutra*', and to anchor the '*ghutra*' we find the '*agal*', a black coiled rope.

In public, women wear the '*abaya*' – a loose, and traditionally black over garment, and the '*shayla*' a long rectangular scarf used to cover the hair. Some women choose to cover their face by wearing the '*niqab*' , while some older ladies still prefer to wear the traditional '*batoola*' - a face mask made from a thick metallic fabric. When with other women or very close male relatives, you'll find Qatari women wearing all types of clothing, while preserving their modesty.

General Guidelines

BEAVIOUR IN PUBLIC

Some of those who are visiting from abroad may already have some understanding of many behavioural expectations in the Middle East.

There is disdain for rude, impolite or aggressive behaviour. If conduct would be questionable internationally- it would be frowned upon here. This section hopes to elaborate a little further, and add a few of the nuances of life in Qatar.

VULGAR LANGUAGE

Swearing is not acceptable in any form. It is unsophisticated, demonstrates a limited vocabulary, and has no place in either the business environment or the public environment.

CLOTHING

There are guidelines for what is appropriate in terms of dress, and this applies to both men and women in all areas of Qatar.

The general rule is that clothing should be modest. It should not reveal too much skin, and it should not be too tight. As a guide, elbows and knees should always be covered, for both sexes. It is possible to wear clothing that meets this criteria but is still unacceptable by having cuts in it, by having a very low neckline or an exposed back.

By having respect for the local culture, the locals will be endeared towards you, and you will not face any antagonism. You may be approached if your clothing is unacceptable.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Photography without permission of the subject is universally unacceptable, and in this region which is culturally conservative, it is a major problem. Photography of women is a particular problem and the local population whether nationals or residents are unappeased by it.

Qatar has strict rules relating to the photography of military sites, security facilities and industrial zones, so we would advise against photography of public infrastructure.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE

Sometimes there can be confusion over how to greet a Muslim when you are first introduced, especially if they are of the opposite gender. A good rule of thumb is when you are introduced to the opposite gender is to greet them by smiling, nodding your head in acknowledgment of the introduction, placing a hand across your chest as a form of greeting or simply greeting them.

Kissing or showing affection in public is simply unacceptable, and therefore the display of affection is frowned upon. Approaching women, blocking their way, or attempting to engage in idle chat with unknown women in public is also unacceptable behaviour. Please allow everyone to get on with their journey undisturbed and uninhibited.

CONDUCT

There is an expectation of behaviour that is community inclusive, and so everyone is expected to conduct themselves in a manner that promotes harmony. Values of others are to be considered at all times and therefore the following are not acceptable:

- Fighting or threatening others
- Use of abusive language
- Wearing culturally unacceptable clothing in communal areas
- Offending religious beliefs
- Property damage or vandalism is not allowed.

Everyone has a moral duty to protect the property of others and therefore to behave in a manner that safeguards the assets of others. Willful destruction or negligence that leaves the property of others at risk is unacceptable.

Cultural Experiences

Qatar is investing heavily in preserving its heritage and creating initiatives to maintain its cultural identity. Because of these, the culture of Qatar is an integral part of daily life, and although some visitors may see and feel the nuances of life in Qatar, others will misunderstand the tacit assumptions of life here.

In order to gain a greater exposure to the nuances of life in Qatar, immersion in every aspect of life here is vital. From visiting the homes of local colleagues, to visiting the many museums and cultural centers, exploring Qatar broadens the mind and brings tranquility to the heart. Some of the many places that can be visited include:

Sheikh Abdulla Bin Zaid Al-Mahmood Islamic Cultural Center

The center is an icon of Qatar, and works to ensure that the guests to Qatar go away from the center with a deeper understanding of what it means to be a part of this beautiful land. Through guided tours, the center hopes to introduce visitors to the culture of Qatar, and to ensure that people have a basic understanding of Islam.

Imam Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab Mosque

The Grand Mosque of Qatar opened its doors in 2011 and is the largest mosque within Qatar. It has the capacity to hold 30,000 worshippers within its grounds, and designed to bring traditional Qatari architecture to life. The mosque is open to the Muslim community for regular prayers, and visitors can undertake an educational tour around the mosque and its grounds by arranging a guide from the Bin Zaid center.

Education City Mosque

Designed by Mangera Yvars Architects.

Emphasizing the approach to engaging with the public, the Education City Mosque's vision is to be the premier community-focused mosque in Qatar and the region. It is located in the Minaretein building, which rests on five large columns representing the five pillars of Islam, with each featuring a verse drawn from the Noble Qur'an. With the capacity to host 1,800 worshippers in its main prayer hall and another 1,000 in its exterior courtyard, it also serves as a community mosque for the surrounding Al Rayyan area.

The Museum of Islamic Art

Designed by the famous architect I M Pei, the building itself is an artistic masterpiece.

The museum holds both a permanent gallery, along with an adjoining temporary exhibition space known as *AlRiwaq*. The permanent gallery holds a wide ranging collection of important historic Islamic artifacts from around the world, while the AlRiwaq space is used by famous visiting artists to display their work.

National Museum of Qatar

The National Museum of Qatar gives voice to the unique story of Qatar and its people; from earliest times to the present day and onwards towards the future.

Designed to be both immersive and experiential, the exhibits - spread over eleven galleries and across 1.5km of walkways - offer a rich exploration through its three main "chapters". These are 'Beginnings', 'Life in Qatar' and 'The Modern History of Qatar'.

Sheikh Faisal bin Qassim Al-Thani Museum

This is a private museum that is located 20 km outside of Doha near the traditional town of Shahaniyah.

The collection is an accumulation of Sheikh Faisal's travels, and boasts a collection of artifacts that number over 15,000 pieces in a range of halls. The collections include areas such as the arts, weaponry manuscripts, fossils, numismatics and a dedicated section on Qatari Heritage.

Katara

The Cultural Village of Qatar, Katara was designed to showcase the cultures of the world.

Opening in phases, the initial part of the project is complete, and the extensive galleries explore the arts, culture and heritage in all of their forms. From the traditional to the contemporary, along with fine dining from around the globe. Katara aims to enrich every visitor.

Souq Waqif

The traditional souq of Qatar is to be found in the same central location that it has occupied for many hundreds of years.

From a bygone era where the ships would dock and unload their goods, the souq still has the same traditional feel, and it is a place where locals and visitors alike can mingle as they buy traditional herbs, spices, clothing and ornaments. No souq is complete without the plethora of restaurants, from the traditional to the contemporary- and from a diverse range of regions too.

We hope you enjoy your visit to Qatar!

Qatari Culture

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